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ABSTRACT

This study sought to identify ways in which programs can provide effective instruction to improve the English language and literacy skills of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) literacy students. The study also examined attendance patterns of adult ESL literacy students and instructional factors related to attendance and provided descriptive information about adult ESL literacy students, their classes, teachers, and the instruction that they receive. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (Author/VWL)

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What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students

STUDY SUMMARY

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What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students

STUDY SUMMARY

Adult English-as-a-second-language (ESL) literacy students lack literacy skills in their native language as well as English communication skills. These learners face the challenge of developing basic skills for decoding, comprehending, and producing print, in addition to learning English. The purpose of the *"What Works" Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students* was to identify ways in which programs can provide effective instruction to improve the English language and literacy skills of ESL literacy students. The study also examined attendance patterns of adult ESL literacy students and class, instructional and student factors related to attendance; and provided descriptive information about adult ESL literacy students, their classes, teachers and the instruction they receive. The study was supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education and the Planning and Evaluation Service, and was conducted by the American Institutes for Research and its subcontractor, Aguirre International.

Methodology

The data collection for the project was from October 1999 through August 2001 in 38 classes from 13 programs in seven states (Arizona, California, Illinois, Minnesota, New York, Texas and Washington) and had a final sample size of 495 students. The sample included two cohorts of students who were followed from the time of entry into class for nine months. Onsite data collectors assessed students at entry and approximately three and nine months after enrollment, regardless of how long the student remained enrolled. Data collectors also observed classes bi-weekly and coded instructional activities using an observation guide developed for the project.

The instructional variables measured through the observation guide were quantified, using percent of observed time on the activity and observer ratings of teachers' use of instructional strategies. The following instructional variables were used in the analyses.

Instructional Emphasis Variables

- **Literacy development emphasis**—Main focus on reading and writing development.
- **ESL acquisition emphasis**—Main focus on speaking, listening, fundamentals of English.

- **Functional skills emphasis**—Main focus on functional literacy (e.g., interpreting forms, labels, using money, maps).
- **Basic literacy skills emphasis**—Main focus on fluency, basic reading skills, grammar and vocabulary.
- **Reading comprehension emphasis**—Main focus on comprehension strategies.
- **Writing emphasis**—Main focus on writing fluency, writing practice.
- **Oral communication emphasis**—Main focus on speaking and listening practice.

Instructional Strategies Variables

- **Varied practice and interaction**—teachers provide students with opportunities to learn in a variety of ways and modalities (e.g., speaking, reading, writing) and by having students interact with each other.
- **Open communication**—teachers are flexible and respond to students' concerns as they arise; ask for open-ended responses; support authentic communication.
- **Connection to the "outside"**—teachers link what is being learned to life outside classroom and bring the "outside" into the class through use of field trips, speakers, and real-life materials.

Outcome Measures

The study measured students' English language and literacy development using a battery of standardized and non-standardized tests, selected after a comprehensive review of all assessments available for low-level adult ESL learners. The battery measured reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. The standardized tests used were:

- The Woodcock-Johnson Basic Reading Skills Cluster **(WJBRSC)** and Reading Comprehension Cluster **(WJRCC)**, which measured basic reading and comprehension abilities;
- The oral Basic English Skills Test **(BEST),** measured English speaking and listening;
- Adult Language Assessment Scales **(A-LAS)** Writing Assessment, measured writing ability; and
- Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System **(CASAS)** Form Completion Test, measured functional writing.

The study also included an interview about student literacy practices and an alternative reading demonstration assessment, which measured student fluency and comprehension through reading of authentic materials. Each assessment was conducted individually and data collectors gave instructions for each test, and conducted the literacy practices interview, in the learner's native language.

Selected Findings

Students in the Study

The average age of students in the study was 40; they were 72% female and had an average of 3.1 years of schooling in their home country. The table below summarizes the students in the study by language group and prior education.

Education in Home Country, By Language Background

Student Language Background	Number of Students	Mean Years of Education in Home Country	SD of Mean Years	Percent of Students with No Formal Education
All *What Works* Participants	490	3.1	2.8	33.1
Spanish – Mexican	285	4.0	2.7	17.9
Spanish – non-Mexican	43	3.8	2.2	11.6
Hmong	38	0.3	0.9	81.6
Somali	47	1.7	2.9	66.0
All others*	77	1.8	2.5	57.1

Note: Prior education data were missing from five students in the final study sample of 495.
*More than 30 other languages are included in this group.

Student, Class and Instructional Variables Related to English Language and Literacy Growth

The study examined the relationship of instructional content, instructional strategies, student characteristics, teacher characteristics and class variables on student outcomes using a complex statistical technique, latent growth modeling. Findings for the reading and writing assessments using this technique are summarized below.

Variables Related to Growth in Basic Reading Skills (WJ BRSC)

Instructional Variables

- Students in classes where teachers made connections to the "outside" or real world, had more growth.

Class Variables

- Shorter scheduled class time (measured by total hours offered)—other things being equal, the shorter the class's weekly scheduled meeting hours, the faster the rate of students' learning in basic reading skills.

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Student Variables

- Students who had more years of formal education (proxy for native language literacy) initially had faster growth, but this benefit faded over time.
- Students with higher initial oral English abilities (BEST score) had faster growth. Some proficiency in oral English skills seems to work as leverage for mastering basic reading skills.
- Younger students started lower but learned faster than older students.

Variables Related to Growth in Basic Reading Comprehension (WJ RCC)

Instructional Variables

- Students in classes where teachers used students' native language as an aid to instruction had faster growth.

Students Variables

- Students who had a higher rate of attendance (proportion of hours student attended by total hours class was offered) grew faster.
- Students who have higher initial basic reading skills (BRSC score) improved in reading comprehension faster, but this benefit emerged slowly over time.

Variables Related to Growth in Oral English Language Development (BEST)

Instructional Variables

- Students in classes where teachers used students' native language as an aid in instruction had faster development.
- Students in classes where the teacher used a varied practice and interaction strategy in class had faster growth.
- Students in classes where the teacher emphasized oral English communication in instruction had faster growth.

Class Variables

- Classes that had more scheduled instructional time had more student growth.

Student Variables

- Younger students showed faster growth.
- Students that attended at a higher rate had faster growth.
- Students with higher initial basic reading skills (BRSC score) had faster growth.

Other Assessment Measures

No instructional or class variables were related to student gains in writing, using either assessment (ALAS or CASAS). In fact, there was very little improvement in student's writing skills over the study period. No teacher characteristics were found to be statistically related to any outcome measure.

Student Attendance Measures

The study also examined the relationship of student, instructional, class and teacher variables of the attendance patterns of adult ESL literacy students, using four measures of attendance:

- *Total hours*— total number of instructional hours attended;
- *Total weeks*— total number of weeks attended;
- *Rate of attendance*— proportion of hours attended out of hours possible to attend; and
- *Intensity*— average number of hours attended per week.

Students in the study attended an average of about 16 weeks and 128 total hours. They attended about two-thirds of possible time (rate of 0.64) and just under an average of seven hours per week. The table below shows student means on each measure.

Overall Attendance of Adult ESL Literacy Students (N=495)

	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Total Hours of Attendance	128.7	106.0	94.3
Total Weeks of Attendance	16.2	16.0	8.1
Rate (hours attended/possible hours)	0.64	0.66	0.19
Intensity (hours per week)	6.9	6.3	3.3

Each attendance provided different information about student attendance patterns. *Total hours* gives us the amount of time the student was in class and exposed to instruction and *total weeks* informs us of the total length of time a student attended class. *Rate* measured how often the student attended, regardless of how many hours the class was scheduled. It is a measure of how often the student took advantage of the class time offered and may reflect student motivation to attend. Finally, *intensity* is a measure of how much attendance the student had in a given time. It is a measure of the dosage or concentration of attendance time. We used the statistical procedure of hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to examine the variables related to each attendance measure.

Total Weeks and Total Hours of Attendance

The HLM analyses revealed that the following student and class characteristics were related to more total hours and more total weeks of attendance:

- Student age (older students attended more weeks and hours);
- Students with lower basic reading skills at entry into class;
- Students who started class within the first three weeks; and
- Classes where teachers had more instructional focus on literacy development.

The analysis also suggests that an instructional strategy using varied practice and interaction is also positively related to total hours and total weeks of attendance, especially for younger students.

Rate and Intensity of Attendance

The HLM analyses found the following variables related to rate and intensity of attendance.

- Student age (older students attended at a higher rate and intensity);
- Unemployed students attended and a higher rate and intensity;
- Students in classes with more scheduled instructional hours per week attended at a lower rate and intensity; and
- Older students who were mandated to attend attended at a lower rate and intensity than younger mandated students.

Type of instruction and type of class had no positive effect on rate or intensity of attendance. This lack of findings is intriguing, since it means that regardless of the class arrangement or instructional approach, students' attendance rate did not increase significantly from the overall average rate of about 0.65 percent of the time.

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